

# Asking to See the Lord (Exodus 33:12-34:9)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Exodus

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## I. Review and Background

- a. Moses has descended from Mount Sinai with the two tablets on which were engraved the 10 Commandments, after being with the Lord for 40 days. Aaron and the people had constructed a golden calf, and referred to it as the god who delivered them from Egypt.
- b. After the golden calf is destroyed, three thousand people die as a result of their idolatry. Then Moses intercedes with the Lord to make atonement for the people, and even tells the Lord to blot his own name out of the Lord's book, the Book of Life, if the Lord is going to destroy all the Israelites.
- c. The Lord tells the people that He will not accompany them on their journey to the Promised Land, because they are stiff-necked. However, He will send His Angel with them, to drive out their enemies from Canaan. The people mourn at hearing this 'bad news', and follow the direction to remove their glorious/bright clothing as well as their ornaments, at Mount Sinai.
- d. Moses pitches his tent outside the camp, and meets with the Lord there periodically. There the Lord speaks to Moses, "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend".

## II. Moses Asks to See the Lord

- a. Read **Exodus 33:12-34:9**.
- b. Storyline:
  - i. Moses says to the Lord, "If I have found grace in your sight... :"
    1. *Don't leave me* to lead these people alone on this journey (You must go with us); and
    2. *Reveal Yourself to me* that I may see you clearly".
  - ii. The Lord says to Moses, "Yes, you *have* found grace in My sight, and I know you above all people. Therefore... :"
    1. I will go with you; and
    2. I will reveal My glory to you
      - a. *However*, you cannot see My face; for

- b. “No man can see My face and live.”
  - 3. Moses cuts out two stone tablets like the ones God originally gave him, which Moses had smashed. He rises early and ascends Mount Sinai, taking the tablets with him as the Lord commanded.
    - a. Moses calls upon the name of the Lord there.
    - b. Moses is hidden in a cleft in the rock, covered by “the hand of the Lord”.
    - c. The Lord passes by and proclaims Who He is (a powerful statement revealing His nature as both merciful and just, bringing judgment on the wicked).
- c. A few words about “grace”.
  - i. Reading from the OSB, which is based on the LXX, a very important word in the New Testament shows up six times in this segment.
    - 1. The expression “(Moses) found *grace* in the sight of the Lord” is mentioned six times.
    - 2. This is the same Greek word “grace” ( χάρις, charis) in the LXX that we find in the New Testament in places like:
      - a. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of *grace* and truth. John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, “He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.” And of His fullness we have all received, and *grace* for *grace*. For the law was given through Moses, but *grace* and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (**John 1:14–17**, NKJV)
        - i. Note that the word “grace” is used four times in this passage.
      - b. “For by *grace* you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” (**Ephesians 2:8–9**, NKJV)
        - i. This passage is very popular in Evangelical Protestant circles.
    - 3. The English word “grace” has many meanings. Protestants define “grace” when the word is used in a theological sense as:

the unmerited favor of God. You will even see this definition in modern English language dictionaries.

- a. They get this definition from the Protestant Reformers (Luther, Calvin, etc.) who defined the term based on their reading of what Paul said in **Ephesians 2:8-9**. (They taught that the word grace, by definition, must be something given freely *based on nothing we did beforehand*).
  - b. However, Paul did not invent this word. It was a very common Greek word and is used dozens of times in the LXX. If we want to know how the first century Christians (like Paul) understood the meaning of this word, we can look to see how it is used in the LXX.
4. If grace is defined as "unmerited favor", let's see if what the passage we just read from Exodus would convey (where the word is used 6 times), and *if that would make sense*.
- a. Moses would be saying, in effect, "If I have found unmerited favor in your sight...if you appreciate me and want to bless me completely independent of me doing anything good or bad, just because you arbitrarily choose to extend your favor to me for no particular reason..."
  - b. **Question:** Do you think that is what Moses is saying here?
    - i. Or is Moses simply asking the Lord if he has found *favor* in God's sight (including the possibility that God's favor could be in part based on the way Moses had been living: being faithful and obedient to the Lord)?
5. A few other places where this word '*grace*' is used in the LXX make it clear that this word does NOT mean unmerited favor. It simply means *favor*, regardless of whether that favor is merited or not. Examples where the word *charis* / *grace* is used in the LXX where the *favor is the result of something good the person did beforehand*:
- a. The passage in **Deuteronomy 24** on divorce.
    - i. "If a man takes a wife and marries her, and it should be she finds no favor before him, because he found something shameful in her, and he

writes her a certificate of divorce...”  
**(Deuteronomy 24:1, LXX. OSB)**

1. Obviously the word *charis* here is translated “favor”; she does not have favor from her husband *because she did something shameful* (adultery, for example; unclear what else might qualify).
  2. Logically, it does not make sense that a husband would not give his wife unmerited favor *because of her shameful actions!*
- ii. When Ruth is shown “grace/favor” by Boaz, a kinsman of her mother-in-law (he instructs his men to look after her as she is gleaning in his fields), the word is used three times. She asks why she is receiving this grace (favor).
1. Read **Ruth 2:10-12**.
  2. Boaz explains that Ruth was shown grace/favor for a good reason. It was because she had been so kind in remaining with and caring for her widowed mother-in-law.
  3. In this grace/favor shown by Boaz, *Ruth is being repaid* for her righteousness.
- iii. Mordecai, the relative of Esther, saves the king’s life by revealing a plot against him (**Esther 2:21-23**). Later on, one night when the king has a hard time sleeping, the king has the royal records read to him and wonders if any grace/favor had been done for the man (Mordecai) who saved his life.
1. Read **Esther 6:1-3**.
  2. Obviously the *grace/favor* that the king wishes to extend to Mordecai was directly related to the good thing Mordecai had done in saving the king’s life.
- iv. **Proverbs 3:37** (LXX) “God opposes the arrogant/proud but gives grace to the humble”.

1. This famous proverb is quoted (from the LXX) by two New Testament writers, in **James 4:6** and **1 Peter 5:5**.
  2. Here again, the favor/grace is bestowed by God based on something we do (choosing to be humble).
6. Bottom line: the word “grace” in the NT and OT is a common word that simply means favor. The Greek word *does not* mean “unmerited favor”. The favor could have been either merited or unmerited. Therefore, it *could* be based on something the person did.
- a. Therefore, Moses could receive favor in the eyes of God as a natural result of the way he was living before the Lord. This was an expectation Moses had, based on the way he had been living before the Lord (unlike the Israelites who had been unrighteous).
  - b. Similarly, John is saying in **John 1** that while the Law came through Moses, Jesus brings us truth and *favor* from God.
  - c. Likewise, Paul is saying we are saved *by God's favor* as opposed to being saved by following the Law of Moses. He is not saying that nothing we do has anything to do with the favor we receive from God.
- d. The Lord tells Moses, “No one can see My face and live.”
- i. This is a clear and powerful statement from the Lord, one that applies to all people. No one can see His face and live!
  - ii. The Father and the Son are both eternal, divine, uncreated and worthy of worship as God.
  - iii. However, one of the personal attributes of the Father that is not shared by the Son is that the Father cannot be seen by humans.
    1. (Referring first to the Father) “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” (**John 1:18**, NKJV)
    2. (Referring to the Father) “...He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man

has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen.” (1 Timothy 6:15-16, NKJV)

- iv. This is why Isaiah thought he was in big trouble when he saw “the Lord of hosts” in **Isaiah 6**.
  1. Read **Isaiah 6:1-5**.
  2. It explains in **John 12:37-41**, after quoting from **Isaiah 6**, that Isaiah actually saw the Son of God (who later became flesh in Jesus).
    - a. “These things Isaiah said *when he saw His glory and spoke of Him.*” (**John 12:41**, NKJV)
  3. Likewise, early Christians understood that whenever someone “saw” the Lord in the Old Testament, this must refer to seeing *the Son of God*. It *could not* refer to literally seeing the Father, which is impossible for humans.
    - a. For further information on this see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, p. 643, article on ‘Theophany’ (appearances of God in the Old Testament).
    - b. Also see Tertullian in *Against Praxeas*, chapters 14-16; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, pp. 609-612.

### III. God Reveals His Nature

- a. Re-read **Exodus 33:19 & Exodus 34:6-7**.
- b. How you see God will have enormous impact on your spiritual life.
  - i. Some of us can tend to see God as distant task-master who is just waiting for us to mess up, so that he can punish and condemn us.
  - ii. Others can tend to see God as *the great enabler*, Who like a permissive parent looks the other way, excuses away our deliberate sins and never disciplines us.
- c. Let us strive to see God accurately, as He really is: in stereo 3-D, seeing *all sides* of His nature.
  - i. Read **Romans 11:19-22**. Consider *both* the kindness and severity of God.
  - ii. Read **2 Peter 3:5-9**. God is longsuffering, *not wanting any to perish*; nevertheless *He will bring judgment on the ungodly*.

- d. **Question:** What about the statement that the Lord will “visit the lawlessness of the fathers upon the children and grandchildren to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generation”? Does this mean that the children and grandchildren will bear the guilt of *the sins of their forefathers*?
- i. Read **Ezekiel 18**, which clarifies this.
  - ii. Each person will be judged by God on the basis of *his own sin*.
    1. If our father was righteous or wicked, neither the credit nor the guilt for what they did will be inherited by their descendants.
  - iii. If a man who lived a wicked life turns to God and repents at the end of his life, the Lord is willing to forgive that person for all the wickedness he committed.
    1. God is pleased when we repent, and does not want *anyone* to perish!
    2. This message of God’s mercy upon the wicked *when they repent* is illustrated by Jesus in:
      - a. the Parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin and Prodigal Son (**Luke 15**);
      - b. the story of Zacchaeus (**Luke 19**); and
      - c. elsewhere throughout the gospels.
- e. David, author of many of the psalms, is celebrated as perhaps the greatest example of someone having a close, personal devotional life with the Lord. However, I believe David’s devotional life *was* founded on clear understanding of God’s nature, *based on reading and understanding this revelation given to Moses*.
- i. Read **Psalm 103** (designated **Psalm 102** in LXX).
    1. David “saw” (figuratively, not literally) God through the writings of Moses in **Exodus 34:6-7**.
    2. That is why David could speak so powerfully and vividly about the *mercy of God*.
    3. He also knew that this mercy is extended to those who fear God, and who do His word!
- f. Some Christians struggle with the nature of God as revealed in the Old Testament (seeing the anger and judgement of God, for example). However,

when I read the Old Testament in passages like these *I am encouraged* to see the kindness, mercy and compassion of God as well!

#### IV. Epilogue - Did Moses Ever Receive His Request?

- a. **Question:** Did Moses *ever* get to “*see God*”? Would this famous request, denied here, be fulfilled later on?
- b. Consider what it says (in the LXX) in a later passage, from **Numbers 12**.
  - i. “*I will speak to him* mouth to mouth apparently, and not in dark speeches; and he has seen the glory of the Lord; and why were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” (**Numbers 12:8**, Brenton LXX En)
    1. Here I am using Brenton’s translation of the LXX instead of the OSB (which I typically use in these lessons) since Brenton gives a more literal translation of this verse.
    2. Note that this is in the future tense: “*I will speak*”, rather than in the present tense (I speak or I am speaking) or in a past tense (I spoke or I have spoken).
    3. The LXX says, literally the Lord will speak to Moses “mouth to mouth”, which may strike us as an awkward expression in English (and why some translators of the LXX switch it to “face to-face”, a more familiar expression for us).
  - ii. Tertullian comments on this (realize that his point is based on a literal reading **Numbers 12** *from the LXX text*):
    1. “For when Moses desired to see the Lord, saying, ‘If therefore I have found grace in Your sight, manifest Yourself to me, that I may see You distinctly,’ (**Exodus 33:13**) the sight which he desired to have was of that condition which he was to assume as man, and which as a prophet he knew was to occur. Respecting the face of God, however, he had already heard, ‘No man shall see me, and live.’ (**Exodus 33:20**) ‘This thing,’ said He, ‘which you hast spoken, will I do for you.’ (**Exodus 33:17**)”
    2. “Then Moses said, ‘Show me Your glory.’ And the Lord, with like reference to the future, replied, ‘I will pass before you in My glory,’ etc. Then at the last He says, ‘And then you shall see My back.’ (**Exodus 33:18-23**) Not loins, or calves of the legs, did he want to behold, but the glory which was to be revealed in the latter days.



3. “He had promised that He would make Himself thus face to face visible to him, when He said to Aaron, ‘If there shall be a prophet among you, I will make Myself known to him by vision, and by vision will I speak with him; but not so is my manner to Moses; with him will *I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently*’ (that is to say, in the form of man which He was to assume), ‘and not in dark speeches.’” (**Numbers 12:6-8**, LXX)
  4. (Source: Tertullian, *Against Marcion* book 4, chapter 22; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 385)
- c. Moses did in fact “see the Lord” later on (the Son, not the Father), as Tertullian alluded, when Moses appeared with Jesus and Elijah at the Mountain of Transfiguration. Here, Moses sees the Son of God’s radiant face, face-to-face!
- i. Read **Matthew 17:1-8**.
  - ii. Moses did in the end receive what He asked for; however it was 1400 years after his famous request. He “saw the face of the Lord” when he was brought back to appear with Jesus, the Son of God!